81 gays left local Navy sites Discharges were 23% of total

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GOOSE CREEK-The Navy's "nuke school" here discharged at least 81 sailors last year who said they were gay or lesbian - by far the highest rate in the Navy under the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

The discharges came in a record-setting year for the number of homosexuals put out of the military under the Clinton-era policy. More than 1,200 homosexuals were discharged from the services in 2000, the most since 1987.

Pentagon figures show that in 2000, 358 Navy service members out of 366,000 active-duty personnel were released because of their sexual orientation.

Of those 358, 81 of them - or 23 percent of the Navy's total - were from two local outfits: the Naval Nuclear Power Training Command and Nuclear Power Training Unit.

Navy officials said they don't know what triggered the sudden increase. In 1999, only 20 service members were released.

"There's been no change in policy or leadership, no seeking people out," said Cmdr. Max Underwood, executive officer of the Training Unit.

One possible explanation: Service members may be using sexual orientation as an excuse to leave the academically demanding nuclear program.

"But that's just speculation. I have no way of knowing," Underwood said.

Under Navy policies, if a service member says he or she is homosexual, commanders usually take the statement at face value. The sailor is then provided with a lawyer, and the matter ends with a general or honorable discharge, he said.

A spokesman for Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a Washington, D.C., group that tracks gay military discharge rates, said the high numbers at the school should set off alarms.

At other installations with such rates, gay service members often have been targets of abuse and harassment, said Steve Ralls, the group's spokesman.

Ralls said the loss of 81 service members "is a big loss to the base." Citing General Accounting Office estimates, he said the cost of retraining those new service members would be at least $2.3 million.

"When you take into account that these men and women are very bright, in fact some of the Navy's brightest, the loss is even more considerable."

Since the Navy scuttled its base in North Charleston, the Nuclear Power Training Command has emerged as one of the area's largest and more intriguing military installations.

Housed in a $120 million campus at the Naval Weapons Station, the school trains more than 3,400 students a year to run nuclear reactors on the Navy's nuclear subs and aircraft carriers.

Most students were in the top 10 of their high school graduating class. To attract and keep the nation's brightest recruits, the Navy dangles as much as $12,000 in enlistment incentives, $36,000 re-enlistment bonuses and other perks.

Of the 81 discharged last year, most had been in the service less than a year and were in their late teens or early 20s. Most received honorable discharges. Twelve were women. Seventy were white, and the rest were black or Asian, Pentagon figures show.

All but one were "statement" cases - cases in which a service member acknowledged to a superior that he or she was homosexual.

"We only react when a member comes forward and makes an admission," Underwood said. "It's completely self-generated."

The lone "acts" case involved a service member who was discovered engaging in homosexual conduct.

President Clinton made protection of gays in the military one of his first priorities after he was elected in 1992, and Congress passed the so-called "don't ask, don't tell" policy the next year.

The policy allows homosexuals to remain in the armed services as long as they do not reveal their sexual orientation. At the same time, supervisors are not supposed to ask subordinates about sexual preferences.

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network opposes the doctrine, saying that the policy "is the only law in the land that authorizes the firing of an American for being gay."

Ralls said the policy often doesn't work. Suspected homosexuals sometimes are beaten or verbally abused. "Usually the reason is a failure of leadership or inadequate training."

Underwood said he knew of no verbal or physical attacks in the nuclear program. "That's not even a remote issue. People typically approach it in a discreet way," quietly notifying a commander, he said.

Post and Courier, The (Charleston, SC)
Date: June 13, 2001
Page: 1
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